Oh, Spock. The Vulcan's hands were unfastening the wristlet and pain brought tears to McCoy's eyes. His hands were on the cloak that covered McCoy's nakedness.

"I would see what human is to human."

"But my lord," Tarsa protested. "The rules of the house--I cannot permit--"

"I will be goverened by my peers," said Spock. "Shall the slaves be matched?" The cloak fell and he turned McCoy to face them, his hands still resting lightly on his shoulders.

Even torture. It was not the stares he shrank from but his own judgement of himself. He could see Arain's perfect body, his youth. He knew as a physician must that Spock's stern exterior covered physiologic youth. And his own time had passed. I'm not, I can't-- Oh, Spock, I can't help you now. But he did not speak aloud.

"Of course," and Spock's voice was surer, more normal now, a velvet purr at his ear, "he has had the benefit of my instruction--"

"Let him try," came the elder's voice.

"It's a fair wager," one of the bondmates said.

"Yes," came another voice. "You've had your profit of us--and him. Light the candle.

Bowing to the will of his patrons, Tarsa lit the time-candle.

"Agreed, let the slaves be matched." And the emerald disappeared.

Spock nodded, and in a gesture natural here, ran his fingers through McCoy's hair and kissed him full on the lips. Half frightened, not sure what to do with his body, not sure Spock meant it, McCoy almost didn't respond. But it might be farewell. He closed his mind to other ways and times and melted into the kiss.

With that yielding, Spock's fingers found their precise contact points and opened the link between them.

Leonard?

Yes? Question, affirmation, they were probably going to die anyway. His lips parted under the Vulcan's. I know who taught Spock to kiss.

Yes. This and much more, all his body's workings, all his needs. You know I would die to serve him. Yet we can live if you heal us.

Flame spread through him again, frighteningly intense, deliciously diffused, and with it all the anger, despair, and guilt the Vulcan had been carrying inside. It was too much. He tried to twist away.

I can't.

You can. With me in your mind you can free him. Go. And Spock squeezed the flame down to a ember, a spark that he could carry with him. He turned and walked to the stage.

"Arain," he said.

The wary eyes watched him without comment, without recognition.

So beautiful, Spock's thought or his own. So guarded. How to wake him?

He knelt beside the boy, not touching him, studying the face, looking ten years younger than it should, framed by fair hair grown out now and tossing on the muscular shoulders. Was that what Jim looked like without the weight of four hundred lives aging him? He didn't know what to say.

"Your lord wronged you by choosing hope."

Arain considered this and shook his head, a lazy lion's gesture. "I chose it," he said.

"In hell?"

"That's where you need it most." He spurned pity, owning himself even in chains.

"And if he finds you--here?"

"Then he can claim me as I am or pass on. I would not know him."

Amnesia then. Imagine waking, in that state, enslaved, knowning only that you had been free, that your death was your mate's wherever he might be--an hour, a day--or a universe away. What does a man have left after he loses identity? Intelligence--courage--a fighter's stubborn refusal to quit. Little enough to integrate a personality on, and Arain felt solid, a whole person. Well, Jim had had personality to spare.

"Then he must--claim you."

Arain glanced pointedly at McCoy's slack organ. "Yes."

Impass. The watchers stirred, expecting more of a show. Spock, I knew I'd spoil things. I can't even--

Look at him. He needs release, or he and I will both die. You are a healer. Try.

McCoy's hands were shaking as he reached out to touch that shining hair. He could try. He was no sexual athlete and he wasn't going to become one at death's door, but he could try. He moved closer and laid his lips on Arain's, barely brushing their velvet surface, such a timid, chaste kiss that Arain's warm breath on his own lips surprised him. Think of Jim, he told himself. He'd either respond or flatten you, but he wouldn't let you die on the vine. He tried it again, with his lips parted a little this time, trying to let the sensation guide him, and he flinched back when Arain's teeth closed on his lower lip. The lion-colored eyes were staring into his--half challenge, half puzzlement. The teeth gave him a warning nip and released him.

"This wasn't your idea?"

"My master's," said McCoy truthfully.

Arain touched the raw wounds at his wrist. "And you will be punished for failure. Well, I suppose I can't be blamed for that--but it will be worse if you don't give them a show." He reached up and ruffled McCoy's hair in return. "You should let your hair grow a little, the gray looks good in it." It was said in a mere whisper, under cover of the caress, but it swamped McCoy with confusion. "Do what I tell you," Arain said.

He was hardly given a choice. Arain twisted and had him flat on his back and helpless before he knew it had turned into a wrestling match. There were snickers from the dark.

"I do not choose to be mocked with slaves, my lords, cowardly slaves who fear the lash more than me. Lie still!" Muscles in his shoulders rolled, as if he were increasing the torque of his grip,